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It's hard to believe that twenty years have now passed since the murders at Jackson State College occurred. The images, sounds, emotions, and even the raw smell of gunpowder are as vivid in my memory today as they were the night this tragedy occurred. The profound and lasting effects of that night, emotional and physiological, remain with me to this day. In a strange sort of way, it has helped to make me what I am today. I have often wondered what type of effect that night had on the many other students and participants, especially the police and highway patrolmen who were, like myself, part of this never-ending nightmare. The "Kill Them All and Let God Sort Them Out" mentality that prevailed on May 14, 1970, was the catalyst for events which will be remembered as a dark stain on Mississippi's history.

A long time friend—who made his way to the Jackson State campus only a few seconds after the shooting ceased and who witnessed the screams, moans, and raw surging emotions of all concerned—tells me that the reason he has religiously written, called me with sometimes annoying frequency, and kept in touch with me over the years is rooted in his own response to the traumatic incident. He is anxious about my well-being because, on the night of May 14, he was incorrectly informed that I had been killed by the highway patrol.

I can honestly say that what happened that night caught me by surprise.

Jackson State College was a very large black college set in the capitol city of Mississippi. For years it had been rumored that the powers that be in Mississippi desperately wanted to correct the mistake they had made by placing a black college in the capitol rather than a prestigious white university. In 1970, the student body was not very involved in local or national politics. Although JSC had a few radical students, most students could only be considered moderately active at best. I do recall a handful of students trying to hold a rally in front of the cafeteria building to show support for the students who had been killed at Kent State on May 4, but the

event went practically unnoticed. Students brushed by the small gathering, as I did myself, to get inside the lunch room. We couldn't relate to what went on at a white college; we had trouble relating to what went on in the world around us. As sad as this may sound, the overwhelming majority of students at Jackson State merely wanted to get their schoolwork done, party, and have a good time. I wonder if the the authorities would have used the extreme force and brutality they applied on the night of May 14 had they known how passive we really were.

It was not unusual for large numbers of students to congregate in front of either the women's or men's dormitories at JSC. These dorms were at opposite ends of the campus, and a major thoroughfare, Lynch Street, ran through the heart of the campus. The night the murders occurred, I was in the company of a group of fraternity brothers and sorority sisters gathered in front of the women's dorm. We were engaged in the usual Que-Delta social chatter when a truck came speeding down the street and passed us, heading in the direction of the men's dormitory. In the truck was a white man who screamed obscenities out of his window. A few minutes later the Jackson police and highway patrol could be seen in the distance, marching slowly past the men's dorm. They appeared to ignore the screams and jeers of the male students, and walked by them as if they were not there. Young men were inside the campus fence and hanging out of the dorm windows. In retrospect, it seems as if the officers had deliberately chosen to make their point at the women's dorm.

The women's dorm had the usual complement of students milling around it, lying on the grass, perched in windows, and seated on the walkway. As the police and highway patrolmen approached, most of the students did not move. I think we all felt that they would continue on past us and leave the campus. Instead, they stopped in front of the west wing, turned, and faced us. One of the city policemen used his bullhorn to order us to get inside the building. This demand was met with loud jeers and protest from the crowd. All of a sudden a bottle was thrown from behind the police and arced in the direction of the cafeteria. From where I stood inside the campus cyclone fence, some twenty feet from the police line, the bottle appeared to hang in the air for an instant before it fell downward on the officers. Something in my gut told me all hell was about to break loose. All unknowing, Vernon Steve Weakley was about to become a part of history and witness to the unthinkable.

The moment the bottle hit the ground the police and highway patrolmen appeared to go crazy. They began to fire their weapons as if all they had been waiting for was an excuse to fire. Howard Levite, Ruby Patrick, James Grant, Johnny Byrd and I all turned and tried to make a mad dash—along with all of the other students—for the small, glass doors of the dormitory. But I was shot in the leg in front of the dormitory wing and knocked to the ground before I could take two steps. I found myself lying on my stomach with my

head facing the dormitory wing. From my vantage point (if you could call it that) I could see students crammed into the dorm, and students pushing and screaming as they tried to get inside. People were wounded in the back as they struggled to get into the building.

Although I have been repeatedly told by the authorities that the shooting only lasted a few seconds, I could swear it lasted a lot longer. In my memory it went on for five or ten minutes. The sky lit up as if it was day. I could hear the loud blasts of shotguns and automatic weapons. While I lay motionless I could feel a rain of shotgun pellets on my legs and backside. Then all noise ceased and for a few seconds there was an eerie silence. As abruptly as the noise stopped, it began again; but this time the air was filled with the screams and cries of the students, many of whom had been wounded by the gunfire or injured by flying glass and the mad crush of bodies pushing at the doorway. Blood was everywhere.

I was in a state of shock, cold and trembling violently as I lay on the ground. Though I knew I had been wounded, it didn't hurt, didn't even seem to matter. I could feel my pants leg wet with blood. Then the cold feeling was replaced with a warm tingling sensation in my leg. I saw Howard Levite, one of my fraternity brothers, peering out from a door inside the dorm. I screamed out to him to help me. How he distinguished my voice from the others, I don't know. I could tell from the look on his face that he was also in a state of shock, looking out over the mass of bodies on the ground. Though I'm sure he was afraid, he was the first person to stand up after the shooting and he moved toward me, stepping over people who lay in the doorway. To this day—though until now I have never been able to share this with him, or with anyone—I admire him for the courage he showed in the face of danger. I was terrified that the highway patrolmen, still only a few feet behind me, would kill Levite. I wanted to scream to him to go back, but the words would not come out of my mouth.

I started to try and get up on my own, but I stumbled and fell over. By this time Levite had made in over to me and begun to pull me to my feet. Our backs were to the patrolmen. As he put his arm around my shoulder, I felt a violent tug on my other arm which spun us both back to the ground. A big, burly highway patrolman pointed his weapon at us and said, "Nigger, you'd better stay your ass on the ground."

"I think he's shot in the leg."

"Stay your goddamn ass on the ground until the ambulance comes."

Another patrolman came over and said, "Leave those niggers alone." Pointing, he continued, "There's a dead nigger over there a more seriously wounded one next to him."

Both moved in the direction the second patrolman pointed. I focused on a body a few feet away from us, lying face up on the ground. Blood still spurted from the injured student's head. Another student was kneeling next to the dying man, crying and slowly rocking back and forth. The full effect

of what was happening started to hit me. Tears flowed down my face. A patrolman pushed the crying student abruptly out of the way and started to tend to the wounded student. By this time another severely injured student was carried to the area where we lay. Shot in the thigh, his pants were still smoking, and he just stared into space. Levite, though ordered to leave by a police officer, stayed by me.

Most of the students who could walk had gotten up and taken shelter inside the building. Only about twenty of us were still on the ground. Most were injured or attending to the injured. Levite helped me up, and we struggled towards the dorm. A highway patrolman ran towards us. We froze in our tracks, but he passed us and ran around the side of the building. We heard a shotgun blast, and then the patrolman screamed, "Goddamnit, you better halt, nigger!" We quickly moved inside.

Inside the building there was blood and glass all over. The entryway, the stairs, the first floor hallway were all covered with blood. Levite and I slipped in the sticky liquid and fell against the wall. There was blood on the walls and ceiling. The women in the dorm were still screaming, and the sound echoed and reverberated through the building. They were crying, screaming, fainting, vomiting. Some were trying to revive girls who appeared to have fainted. I began to worry about what had happened to Ruby Patrick, a close friend, who had been standing outside with us when the shooting started. I grabbed Levite and asked him, "Where's Ruby?" Levite calmed me, told me she was okay, that another fraternity brother, James Grant, had taken her upstairs after I got shot.

I've always had a problem dealing with crowds of crying people. I guess it goes back to when I was a small kid watching my parents, friends, and neighbors cry and show emotion and my grandparents' funerals. On my way up to Ruby's room my heart felt as if it was going to explode. As I leaned on Levite and hobbled down those corridors, Levite must have noticed something was wrong. He kept asking me if I was okay, and saying, "I think maybe you've lost too much blood, Swalos." (Swalos was my nickname.)

When we arrived at Ruby's room no one said anything for a few minutes. Ruby and another girl were crying. No one could believe what had just happened. I edged my way to the window. The streets were lined with the Mississippi National Guard. Ambulance sirens were shrieking and their lights were flashing up and down the street. I shook my head and said to myself that this must all have been planned in advance. How could so many guardsmen be here so soon?

Over a bullhorn, someone announced that all the wounded should come out of the building. Levite and Grant helped me back down the stairs. As they started to put me in the last empty spot in a packed ambulance, a young woman named Mayhorn was brought out. Her head was bleeding, cut all over as if she had been hit full blast with buckshot. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. I told them to let her have my seat. The paramedic

immediately said no, and warned me that I had lost a lot of blood, that her wounds looked worse than they were, and that I should squeeze in. I told them I couldn't ride in there under those conditions, and got out.

By this time the highway patrol and police were gone. The National Guard were courteous, and even looked a little remorseful Another ambulance pulled up, and my frat brothers motioned to them to come over to us. All of a sudden, I felt a pat on my shoulder. It was my older brother Stanley; our mother had sent him over to check on em. Mom got a call that I had been shot and my brother said that they had called every hospital in Jackson, but I wasn't listed. Meanwhile this paramedic checked my leg too, and told me that I should get in the ambulance. Instead of going to the hospital I insisted that my brother take me home. My nerves couldn't take it any more. I was afraid that the authorities would do something to those who had witnessed the shootings, hurt us or threaten us to keep us quiet. I know this may sound silly now, but that was how I felt after the shootings.

Facing my mother was tough. She had asked me not to go to the College that night because of the disturbances of the night before. But she didn't argue; she hugged me and told me she was glad I was okay, and started to see to my leg. The bullet had made a clean exit, and the bleeding had stopped. She gathered her coat and car keys to take me to the hospital, but I said I didn't want to go and asked if our family doctor could take a look at my leg. She called, and he told her to bring me to his office early the next morning.

Although I went directly to bed, I didn't sleep. I went on an emotional roller coaster ride: I would get cold and begin to tremble, my heart would pound so loud it sounded like a drum; then I would all of a sudden calm down when I realized I was safe at home.

The next morning I went to Dr. Britten. (I found out later that many of the wounded students refused to go to the hospital. They, like me, feared reprisals from the authorities if their names were printed in the newspapers. Like me, many students went to their family doctors.) He told my mom and me that I would be alright. Then he gave me a hard look and said, "Son, I've taken care of you and your mom all of your life. Me and your mom would sit up with you when you were a little boy and discuss what you would be when you grew up. I know how hard it is for young black kids to sit back and watch the inequity in America. But the way to change it is not by foolishly throwing your bodies up against bullets and tanks. You've got to mentally rise above all the obstacles they throw at you, work hard to become successful, and from there, work within the system to change things. I know in your eyesight older black people like myself have let you down. But it's not true. We are just working at the pace in which the system will let us. Perhaps when you get to be my age, the pace will be quicker."

Then he shook his finger slowly in my face and said, "Now get out of here and don't ever put this type of stress and worry on your mom again."

Dr. Britten didn't know it, but what he said really stuck. At that time I certainly wasn't the militant he obviously thought I was, but the concepts he put forward continued to puzzle me for a long time. What he was saying was simple, but it took me years to understand it.

Later on that day I was visited by the FBI. An agent questioned me, and seemed to indicate that there may have been a sniper. I told them that was a ridiculous idea. During his interrogation, he mentioned—as if he wasn't really supposed to tell me—that there was an inquiry being held at the Masonic temple down the street from the College. After he talked to me, he insisted on taking my bloodstained and tattered jeans with him.

I went to the Masonic temple. Antoine, the man who had knelt over the murdered student, was giving testimony on stage to what appeared to be members of the media, the mayor's staff, etc. The questioners also seemed to want to focus on the "sniper." But I, and the other students, know that it was only the popping sound that bottle made when it hit the ground that caused the officers to start firing.

After the meeting I went on campus. I looked like it had been hit by the Black Plague. Most of the area was empty. A few parents were hustling their kids out, packing their things in trucks, and hiding their faces from the media. Journalists were everywhere. The school had been officially closed for the year because of the shootings. I can't begin to describe the rage I felt that day as I watched black people scurrying like ants to get off campus. In one single, calculated blow the black population of Mississippi had been thoroughly intimidated. I guess I expected to see students demonstrating, sit-ins, or something. But all I saw was beaten people. The police authorities of Mississippi had closed our institute of higher learning, cut us off from the one avenue to advancement which was available to us. I was depressed for weeks. In close and personal terms, I lost the one thing I needed to help me work through my pain—my friends and my college relationships. So the healing process was difficult and lengthy, as it probably was for all of the students who were part of the events at Jackson State College on the night of May 14.

At the time of the shooting I was employed at the post office. About two weeks after I was wounded, I was picking up mail from the box on the street next to the Governor's mansion. This was a regular thing, and there had never been a problem. But on this particular day I noticed two young highway patrolmen standing near the box. Usually the Governor's mansion is as quiet as a tomb. You'd never see anyone in it, much less guards patrolling the grounds, and I had a bad feeling about the situation. But I told myself I was just paranoid because of what had happened at Jackson State, and walked over to do my job, still limping a little because of my wounded leg.

One of the patrolmen folded his arms and blocked my path. I didn't want trouble, so I gave him a wide berth and tried to keep my composure. I didn't want them to know I was afraid of them. I reached the mailbox, emptied the mail into the mail sack, and began to walk back to the post office on the sidewalk. The officer seemed annoyed that I was ignoring him and moved up very close to me, so close that I had no choice but to go through him, over him, or step off the sidewalk into the street to avoid him. I chose the latter.

It was a Saturday afternoon. Capitol Street was empty. No one was around. Tears started to flow from my eyes, and I relived the emotions of the Jackson State shootings. Although I hadn't done anything to provoke this behavior, still this man had chosen to force his will on me, shoving his might down my throat.

The highway patrolman put his hand on his revolver. He was only inches in front of me, as if he was going to push his chest into me. I stopped, looked him in the eye, and, I took a deep breath and began to slowly bob my head up and down, preparing myself for what was to come. I could see the other patrolman over his shoulder, about twenty yards away, coming towards me at a fast walk. I was not going to let them kill me as they had killed my schoolmates. I stepped forward and my foot touched the street. I looked the man in the eye to let him know that I was making an effort to avoid trouble, but, if he moved into me or began to pull his revolver out or put his hands on me, one of us would die. He burst out laughing and moved back as I passed him. I looked over my shoulder. He didn't follow me, he just kept laughing. When I passed him, the other patrolman started laughing too. When I reported this incident to my supervisor (rumored himself to be a Klansman and a racist) his response surprised me. He seemed genuinely concerned for my safety, and called an inspection by a black union steward, and by his superiors. The incident was eventually investigated by agents from Washington, D.C., but to my knowledge, nothing ever came out of it.

Those patrolmen don't know it, but they also helped me to solidify my resolve to fight racism, and to shape my thinking about the state of Mississippi, highway patrolmen, and racism in general.

Shortly after I confronted the patrolmen, I was contacted by Constance Slaughter, a black woman attorney. She asked me if I would participate in a lawsuit with the families of the two slain students and some of the other wounded students. We sued for thirteen million dollars, but it wasn't about money.

The incident at the mailbox had made it crystal clear to me that someone had to take a stand against injustice and racism. Without that incentive, I probably would have been like the other countless students who ran away from campus and refused to take part in any organized effort to demand the state of Mississippi take responsibility for their crime. Most people feared reprisals, and rightfully so. But I knew I had to stand up for what was right.

Although there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of winning, something inside of me screamed, "You must do it!"

The court case was held on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. All of the evidence presented during the trial clearly showed the highway patrolmen to be responsible for the violence. The most damaging testimony against the Highway Patrol came from the Jackson Police Department. The city policemen were found not to have fired during the shooting; in fact, a city police captain who was supposed to have been in charge of the operation testified that all the officers, including the patrolmen, had orders from him *not* to fire. The Highway Patrol obviously had a different agenda. The captain also verified that it was peaceful on campus on the night of May 14, and that the sole reason the officers were on the Jackson State campus was to protect firemen who were putting out the dumptruck fire. Since the campus appeared calm, they elected to walk through the grounds to get to the vehicles they had parked on the other side of the school, past the women's dormitory. This officer claimed he had no intention of stopping at the dormitory, but that the highway patrolmen decided to order the students into the building. He, along with the other officers, claimed to have heard what they thought was a gunshot (the bottle breaking). The highway patrolmen began to fire without authorization, and the rest is history. The police captain claimed that he, personally, had screamed repeatedly at the patrolmen to make them cease firing. After it was over, the city police took off immediately, and the highway patrolmen stayed and took over from there.

I didn't have much problem with the way he presented this, except that I was right there and I never heard him screaming. But it was true that after the shooting all I saw were highway patrolmen until the National Guard arrived.

The most vivid memory I have of this trial was the testimony highway patrolmen. It was shocking and saddening to see how stupid, how unprofessional, and uneducated these men were. I don't want this to sound like an indictment of the current Mississippi Highway Patrol, because it's not. Shortly after the Jackson State trial, the Patrol began to change its image. For years they were the most feared law enforcement agency in Mississippi. My parents, grandparents and neighbors would tell horror stories of how brutal and racist the Patrol was, and of how they murdered black people on the highways. But now many blacks are highway patrolmen. In fact, a guy by the name of Lewis Younger, a Jackson State student at the time the shootings occurred, was one of the first blacks to graduate from the highway patrol program. For a few years after the trial the Governor would pay surprise visits to Jackson State University and show Lewis off, as if to make amends for what the Highway Patrol had done. I think that if most people at JSU didn't respect Lewis and know him as an intelligent and good-hearted

person, that the mending process between white Mississippi and Jackson State and the black community would never have occurred. Black attitudes were quickly turning militant, and blacks were embracing the idea of armed resistance since the shootings; secret meetings and organizations sprang up everywhere after the event. Lewis helped defuse that at Jackson State.

During the trial, I found out that the big, burly patrolman who had spoken to me so callously the night I was shot was a guy by the name of Lloyd Johns. It was obvious from his demeanor that he had no regrets about firing on students. And his racist attitudes were emulated by his men—it was as if they were all trying to carbon copies of Lloyd Johns. As I sat and listened to their testimonies, I couldn't help but wonder if these men had families and kids of their own. How would they feel if the shoe was on the other foot? If their brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters were forced to undergo such treatment? The patrolmen seemed proud of what they had done, and even laughed and snickered about it while they were on the stand. This stood in stark comparison with the testimony of the police, who seemed openly ashamed of their role in the murders.

I recognized Lloyd Johns as I stood waiting in the hallway for the next session to begin. I heard his voice, the same voice that had said, "There's a nigger lying over there." For a few seconds I just stared at him. He looked me dead in the eyes, as if to say, what the hell are you looking at. He was only three or four feet away, and I was scared stiff. I could feel sweat dripping down my chest and arms inside my clothes. My hand began to clench into a fist.

"So, Vernon, what are you doing?" said a soft voice behind me. It was Constance Slaughter, who put her hand softly against my back and whispered in my ear, "He ain't worth the trouble you'd get yourself and me into today. Let me kick his ass in the courtroom, not out here in the hallway."

As fate would have it, Johns was one of the first men up on the stand. His testimony was arrogant and full of hate. He was the image of the dumb redneck country-boy, the kind of person good Mississippians hate to be mistaken for. From his testimony, it was obvious he thought he ought to get a medal for his fine police work at Jackson State. It was easy to see how things could get out of control with type of adult leadership.

Constance and the other New York lawyers did a good job of making this guy look bad. But I don't believe he ever noticed. To this day he probably brags about how he told the world the truth about black people at the Jackson State trial.

My own testimony was uneventful. My lawyers painted me as a fine, upstanding fraternity man. I talked about how cruel the highway patrol had been after the shootings Call me naive, but after listening to the testimonies of the witnesses, I thought the evidence clearly proved that the murders at

Jackson State were unprovoked. My earlier pessimism disappeared and I thought for sure we would win in Mississippi.

The case did draw a lot of positive publicity that, in my opinion, did the black people of Mississippi a lot of good. But nothing could erase the fact that we lost badly. Justice had once again failed to be meted out in Mississippi. We appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans, and for a few years after that I kept in touch with Constance Slaughter. From time to time I would receive articles from her detailing the lawyers' efforts. Finally I received a letter that said we had won. It was as if a great burden had been lifted off my chest. Then the case went to the Supreme Court.

Years would pass before any word would come. Then one day, as I watched the national news and heard that the Supreme Court had decided not to hear the Jackson State in light of a recent negative ruling on Kent State, my little girl asked me, "Weren't you a part of that?" But for some reason I couldn't answer her. I just sat there shaking my head and watching the network news. I can't begin to explain how confused I was about the Supreme Court's decision. I felt the justice system had let us down. I felt that it was not only Mississippi's justice system that was infected by prejudice; the highest court in the land suffered from the same disease.

It was at that moment that Dr. Britten's words made sense to me. It was up to myself and other young blacks to come to the forefront, roll up our sleeves, and dig into the American system to effect the changes we seek. Blacks must become an integral part of the fabric of our society before our needs, feelings, thoughts, and demands will be considered. Although we are faced by great obstacles, we must continue to move forward inch by inch and to struggle to claim our rights. We must not sit back and expect white people to do it for us. The pace will be slow sometimes, and sometimes it will be faster, but we must continue our journey forward.